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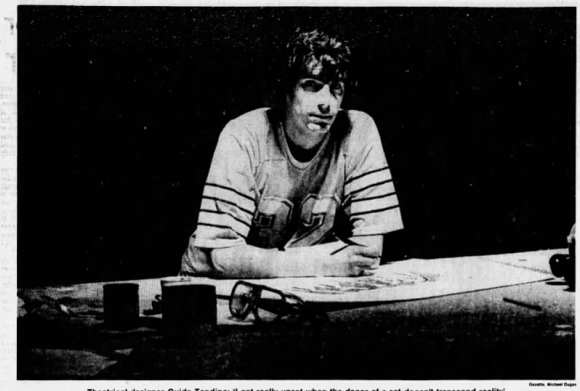

Theatrical designer Guido Tondino: 'I get really upset when the decor of a set doesn't transcend reality'

Gazette, Michael Dugas

Guido Tondino is all 'set' for success

By JULIA MASKOULIS
of The Gazette

In the closed-in field of theatre set designers in Canada, Montrealer Guido Tondino stands out as aberrant as a lonely little petunia in an onion patch.

Not only is he happily heterosexual — a rarity — but his third passion besides design and women is sports. To clear up his bend when he's having difficulty with a design, Tondino finds solace in bashing around a hockey puck alone in an empty ice-rink long after the lights have been turned out for the night.

"I constantly make comparisons between sports and theatre and it drives everyone crazy," said the young designer, who just graduated from the National Theatre School one year ago.

In the past two years, he has designed for 26 professional shows. His skill can currently be seen in the elegant sets and clothes for two of Festival Lennoville's productions this summer. '18 Wheels' and 'Herring bone.'

You might also have seen his set and costumes for the current show at the Saidye Bronfman Centre. 'Side by Side by Sondheim.' He's doing their next show 'Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi' opening Aug. 19.

Or, you may have seen his designs for SBC's production of 'The Rosenbergs' earlier this year or 'Forever Yours, Marie-Lou at Festival Lennoville last summer.

At age 27, Tondino is quickly moving upwards in a highly-competitive field, less worried than ever before about his next job.

"I don't hustle work any more. I know you're supposed to, but I refuse to go out and ask for a job. Let them come to me," he says, shyness and confidence contributing equally to this brazen comment.

Knowing what he has always wanted to do did not make the ups and downs of his career climb less painful. The ride to the present was like a novice horserider hopping bareback on an unbroken bronco. The supreme confidence that his talent would eventually tame the unyielding beast is what allowed him to survive. And finally, it did.

He attributes a great deal of his motivation to his father, Gentile, a teacher of drawing and painting at McGill University's Faculty of Architecture.

Gentile Tondino enrolled Guido in his first art class at the Museum of Fine Arts when he was three. He learned about colors before he even knew the alphabet. From the beginning, the father taugh his eldest son that it doesn't matter what you do in life, it only matters that you do it well. If Guido has followed one guiding principle, that's been it.

"When I got to grade school, I was sure I could draw better than everyone else. In fact, I was pretty cocky about it.

"I always felt kind of special that my father had passed on a sense of aesthetics to me. I thought I had a God-given right to express it, and this attitude saved me later on.

"Art was so important in my family's life, it's still impossible to have dinner without talking about it. What I found strange in school was that the thing that dominated my father's life and his livelihood was of so little importance. It made me angry that art and literature were always so secondary."

After graduating from Marymount High School, Tondino entered the science department of Loyola University for two years.

He was — still is — enamored with chemistry and hopes to return to school one day to further his knowledge of physics.

Loves geometry

"One of my favorite influences comes from the Bauhaus (the German school of functional design) and I'm in love with geometry. It's so crucial to design and so overlooked."

He left Loyola to transfer to the theatre program of Tulane University in New Orleans. "It was expensive, but my father was very good about it. As soon as I got there, I hustled an assistantship as a carpenter. I scrounged free meals. I got by. I spent five years in university but I haven't graduated yet. I still owe Tulane $3,000."

He came back to Montreal from New Orleans only to have the burning desire to enter theatre design fizzle from repeated rejections.

"I asked Maurice Podbrey of Centaur for a job and he laughed in my face when I told him what I wanted to be." The chance to prove himself was still a dream.

"It's amazing how bitter you can get about not being able to do what you want," he reflects about a job he was forced to take as a page-boy in the Queen Elizabeth Hotel.

"It lasted a month, but it was a closed door. I walked around in a ridiculous purple suit carrying a board over my head with the name of the person being paged. I knew I had to get out."

That led to an eight-month job in the hotel's print shop where he did manual labor, learned layout, and greatly improved his French.

He turned to the National Theatre School out of desperation. He was 23 when he entered the three-year design course.

"It was one of the nicest things that's ever happened to me, it was so personal. I'll never forget the first day I walked in and there was a room, all clean, with drafting desks and supplies and a folder with my name on it. The first day of school I woke up at 6 a.m. because I was so excited. Even when I was sick I couldn't bear to miss classes. I didn't miss one class in the three years.

"Everyone was supportive because I was giving so much no matter what. I was so happy to be there. I never went for a break or for lunch. It was concentrated eight hours of design every day five and a half days a week."

Tondino's ideas about design are as firm and fixed as his drive. Although he has done clothes design, he prefers doing sets because he lacks the diplomacy to deal with the vanity of actors.

"I have a great distrust of fashion because it's so constantly changing. I think a good piece of design, whether it's in furniture or clothes, should have enough character to last.

"Designing clothes for women is especially difficult. They have a certain idea of how they should look to be fashionable and it's not the idea you have of them. For instance I like women to be round and fleshy and when I design clothes for them I accent the roundness of their bodies.

"Some designers could get away with it by flattering them and telling them they look wonderful. But when I give it to them they ask me if I'm crazy. I don't have the ability to flatter their vanity.

"If they ask me how they look I tell them you look okay or you look like the part' but that's not what they want to hear. What I feel like telling them is 'who do you think you are, Venus on a half-shell'."

Designing sets is more fulfilling, he says. "I've never cared for realism very much. I don't think it has a place in the theatre. I'm not interessied in doorknobs and details and I find realistic sets are a waste of my time and the audience's too.

"I get really upset when the decor of a set doesn't transcend reality. A good design should have its own life and sometimes make its own statement. I'm not always pleased with my sets, but at least I don't think I've ever done damage to a space by not being aware of is aesthetics."

Bard is ideal

He got the idea for the set design of 18 Wheels, a musical about truckers, while he was driving to Lennoxville one dark, rainy night. "All you could see on the road was the darkness and the shining chrome of bumpers. I thought immediately that was it, that's what being a trucker must be like. But it is a rock musical and the set had to be loud and splashy. I immediately flipped out and I knew the set should dominate and be impressive. It's not a realistic set, like a reproduction of a greasy spoon.

"I'm quite certain a lot of people might say my ideas are crazy.

His ideal playwright is Shakespeare because the Bard doesn't cut into the design's work. It's a lot easier to work for Shakespeare because there's no description other than 'a beach' or 'a room.' I can't stand Shaw. I've spent hours trying to figure out what he's trying to say by the details he gives.

If I ever get an opportunity to do Shaw I'll take his details but I'll bend them to my concept."

And there's no doubt that this soft-spoken, fragile-boned young man would do just that.

Frank Zappa has success despite excess

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
of The Gazette

Frank Zappa has warned us not to buy his album **Zappa Live in New York** because of a legal hassle between his old recording label (Warners, which made this disc) and Phonogram, his new company, which has a three-record opus waiting in a locked closet.

Do not heed his advice.

The 'Live' album demonstrates how good Zappa is on the stage as well as in the studio — he is after all the most overtly serious composer-artist of the rock era. The record does not go without Zappa's excesses, however.

No rock figure has been as scatalogical and obscene as Zappa. He is the intellectual punk. He usually makes his point — as he says, "I still like him and women with equal disrespect" — but occasionally fails. Thus, about 15 minutes of this double set is filled with fairly tedious stuff.

'The Illinois Enema Bandit' — a true story about a robber who also gives his female victims "a little enema" — starts off beautifully with an introduction by Don Pardo (the booming 1940s-style announcer of television comedy show 'Saturday Night Live'), but eventually disintegrates into a long boring guitar solo and desperate comic repitition.

He redeems himself on a trenchant story about the singles bar scene, entitled 'Honey, Don't You Want A Man Like Me?' Here, the guy is "the Playboy type (he smoked a pipe). His favorite phrase was 'Outa-site!' He had an Irish setter," while the gal is "an office girl (her name was Betty). Her favorite group was Helen Reddy. They discussed the weather."

And so it goes, until "He took her home ... to a motor court" where they perform the unprintable.

Zappa is unique in rock and popular music. He combines classical avant-garde influences like Igor Stravinsky and Edgar Varese with rock magician Jimi Hendrix and soul master James Brown, with an updating of wacky

SPIN OFF

Spike Jones for spice (not to mention the acid of Lenny Bruce). 'Live in New York' offers plenty of evidence of this synthesis.

Aside from the satire, there are numerous serious pieces, climaxed by the 18-minute 'Purple Lagoon,' played originally on 'Saturday Night Live' and featuring a full orchestra with horn-man Randy and Mike Brecker leading the way. The piece demands attention and is one of Zappa's most successfully conceived compositions ever. The fusing of two poles, the rock and classical traditions, has never been more successfully attained, excesses and all.

* * *

Thank God the Kinks are still alive and, judging from their latest album, **Misfits** (Arista), very well, thank you. Indeed, they're at the top of their form.

The group is, with the Rolling Stones and The Who, the only rock outfit left from the Beatlemania era of the mid-1960s that is still producing original fairly fresh records.

Thank Ray Davies — perhaps the Woody Allan of pop — for keeping the group together. As a rock lyricist perhaps nobody reflects as many diverse qualities: Compassion, irony, humor (either deadpan or black), sarcasm, and bright wit. Davies is obviously a very clever fellow and that is why the Kinks are still around.

The group that started with unparalleled fuzz-toned punky rock'n'roll in 1964 — with such classics are 'You Really Got Me' — quickly developed a more thoughtful stance. Davis continued his idiosyncratic style throughout the current decade, but the group has failed to crack the superstar bracket, although there's hardly a more respected group in the business.

'Misfits' may well be the breakthough album. It is the wittiest rock album of the year, smart without being smartass, disciplined yet ever-rocking. (Ray's brother Dave offers some blistering guitar fillets).

Davies offers his introspective imagination to a wide variety of themes. There's the delightful 'Hay Fever' — for all the allergy sufferers in the house — in which the poor singer explains his problem to his girlfriend: 'Sitting by my stereo all alone. My baby calls me on the telephone. She says, Baby take me out for a dance ... How can I dance when I can hardly breathe. Wish I could cure this infernal allergy," the pathos set to the a bouncy rock beat.

Then there's 'Live Life', a trenchant comment on the state of the world: "Have you heard about the trouble we've had (thanks a lot to John Gosling's keyboard nuggets). It is a sophisticated record, with a lot to say, but it's still riveting rock 'n' roll. The combination is spellbinding.

TUNED IN

By Thomas Schnurmacher

Montreal to hit that 'Happy Trail'

Montreal has played host to Expo 67, the Olympics and assorted film festivals, but only now can we be sure that we have hit the big time. The rodeo comes to Jarry Park on Sept. 11, starring none other than Roy Rogers. How are we ever going to follow an act like his? Very carefully, with a broom.

'Saturday Night Fever' is the first double album ever to sell a million copies in this country. It is now the largest grossing LP in Canadian recording history.

An exhibition of the photographs of **Diane Chaneer** and **Janice K. Bernath** opens Monday at the Westmount Public Library.

Tonight on the CBC radio program 'Between Ourselves' you can listen to the story of how bush flying opened up the north to mining prospectors and geologists. There will be interviews with a number of Canadian bush pilots such as **Johnny Fauquier** of Second World War Pathfinder fame, and of particular interest to Montrealers will the comments by **Doreen Day**.

GLEN FORD
For trivia fans

During the 1930s, Doreen combined the job of fashion co-ordinator at Eaton's with being the wife of a bush pilot who flew in northern Quebec. The program is on tonight from 6.15 p.m.

Everyone knows that sex is going to be very big this fall on all three American networks. I'm all for a liberated approach to sex on television, but a new show called 'American Girls' scheduled for Saturday nights on CBS is going a bit too far.

The pilot for the show has scenes where prostitutes, some very young, are sold at an auction to male buyers who intend to send them off to the white slave trade in South America. While I would defend the right to discuss a topic such as this one in a movie for those 18 and over, i.e. 'Pretty Baby', I do not think that television is the place for such subject matter.

Montreal's leading English comedy group, **the Clones**, formerly the Clone Theatre have just returned from a junket to Toronto. The group performed at Yuk Yuk's in the heart of pretentious Yorkville. The audience approved and the group will do another stint in Toronto, the Big Lemon, sometime in the fall.

For trivia fans

The special effects people for the movie 'Meteor' have created a new hologram effect which combined with Dolby sound will make the audience feel that a gigantic meteour is heading straight at them in the theatre.

First 3-D glasses and now this.

Glenn Ford, who, as trivia fans well knows, was born in Quebec, had to slap an actress during the making of the Universal TV movie 'Evening in Byzantium.' Glenn was rather upset because he had to do it take after take, each time told to hit harder.

Glenn must be out of practise. The last time he hit a woman was back in 1952 when he smacked **Rita Hayworth** in the face for 'Affair in Trinidad'.

Danny Burns, who used to be on CKGM, went to Vancouver and now he's coming back east. No, not to Montreal. Danny will be living in Toronto where he starts working for radio CHFI at the end of July. Danny would love to start this very minute, but he has a broken jaw and that jaw is wired shut. CHFI is waiting patiently for the wire to come off.

Narcs on Crescent Street

Some people have written to tell me that old Montreal and Crescent Street are full of narcs. That reminds me of the good old days when the RCMP used to send undercover agents to the McGill Union. Those horses were a dead giveaway.

Remember that you can lead a horse to water, but before you push him in, remember what a wet horse smells like.

Screenwriter **Richard Zeinicker** and film-maker **Craig Cuttle** have been awarded a development grant by the Institut Quebecois du Cinema to work on a screenplay entitled 'Destiny's Angel'.

Watch for a scandal-tinged member of European royalty to drop by Montreal during the next few weeks. Also watch for a top European actress to come to town to preside over a super jet-set party. Hint: The lady is blonde and sells cologne. Very well, too.

Montreal rock photographer **Lawrence Kirsch** is having an exhibition of his color photos of rock celebrities at Sam the Record Man on Ste-Catherine Street West. The exhibition is on for the duration of the summer.

Pat Boone saw a record title 'You Useta Be My Baby' and he was very upset that the youth of America be under the mistaken impression that the phrase was the correct spelling. It's nice to know that Boone is a man who shows concern over matters of such critical importance. Wake up, Pat. It's 1978.

Radio station CHOM-FM is asking Quebec talent to submit tapes of original material for airing on the radio. Each tape will be judged by a panel of judges that includes **Donald K. Donald**, **Juan Rodriguez** of The Gazette, **Natalie Pawinsky** of Le Devoir, **Mimi Badr** of the Montreal Star and **Ceco Letendre** of Quebec Rock magazine.

Of all tapes submitted, the top 10 groups will be selected by the judges for a benefit concert in early October. This concert will be recorded live and the concert album will be released at the beginning of November.

During the concert, the best group will be selected, using stage presence and performance as the final judging criteria. It does not say anything in the official rules and regulations about a swimsuit competition or Congeniality Award.

For more information, send a stamped self-addressed envelope to CHOM-FM, Box 977, Westmount, Quebec. Sept. 8 is the deadline to submit tapes. Good luck.

Goulet with Miss Universe

Speaking of contests, **Robert Goulet** will be a special guest star on 'The 1978 Miss Universe Pageant' to be broadcast live via satellite from Acapulco, Mexico this Monday at 9 p.m. on CBS.

Goulet will join previously announced master of ceremonies Bob Barker, television hostess Helen O'Connell and the beautiful women from around the world who will compete for the title of Miss Universe.

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